

Message Text

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PAGE 01 PANAMA 00168 01 OF 02 112142Z
ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 IO-13 SAB-02 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05
H-01 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01
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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5213
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 PANAMA 0168

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PINT, PN
SUBJECT: THE POLITICAL OPENING CONTINUES

SUMMARY: IN AN USUALLY FRANK TELEVISION DISCUSSION, TWO
OPPOSITION LEADERS CALLED FOR CONTINUATION OF THE POLITICAL
OPENING WHICH BEGAN DURING THE TREATY PLEBISCITE, AND
COMMENTED ON HOW POLITICAL PARTIES SHOULD FUNCTION AND THE
CONSTITUTION BE REVAMPED. AN OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSE
DENIED THAT THE RECENT OPENING IN POLITICS WAS A MERE
"INDIAN SUMMER" THAT WOULD VANISH WHEN THE TREATIES ARE
RATIFIED. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JANUARY 4, TELEVISION CHANNEL 2 NEWS DIRECTOR MARIO
VELZSQUEZ HELD A WIDE-RANGING AND UNUSUALLY FRANK DISCUSSION
OF PANAMA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM AND PROSPECTS WITH TWO LEADING
OPPOSITION FIGURES, LIBERAL PARTY LEADER DAVID SAMUDIO AND
MARIO GALINDO OF THE INDEPENDENT LAWYERS MOVEMENT. SUBSTANTIAL
EXCERPTS ARE CONTAINED FBIS/PANAMA PA 041925Y, FIVE TAKES.

2. BOTH OPPOSITIONISTS AGREED THAT A REAL AND EFFECTIVE
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PAGE 02 PANAMA 00168 01 OF 02 112142Z

POLITICAL OPENING BEGAN BEFORE THE TREATY PLEBISCITE
AND HAS CONTINUED TO DATE; POLITICAL PARTIES AND OPPOSITION
SPOKESMEN HAVE BEEN PERMITTED TO EXPRESS THEM-
SELVES MORE FREELY THAN EVER BEFORE UNDER TORRIJOS.
THEY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THIS OPENING HAD BEEN GRANTED BY
THE GOVERNMENT FOR ITS OWN REASONS, RATHER THAN BEING
WON BY OPPOSITION EFFORTS. MOREOVER, SAID GALINDO:

"... THERE ARE POLITICAL GROUPS IN AND OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT THAT DO NOT LIKE IN THE LEAST THE DEMOCRATIC OPENING... ONCE THE TREATIES ARE RATIFIED IT IS HIGHLY PROBABLE THAT THEY WILL APPLY ALL THE POLITICAL WEIGHT THEY HAVE... TO CONVINCE THE GOVERNMENT OF THE INCONVENIENCES OF A DEMOCRATIC OPENING." HOWEVER, GALINDO CONTINUED, IF THE PARTIES AND THE PEOPLE REALLY WANTED IT, THE DEMOCRATIC OPENING WOULD ENDURE.

3. BOTH MEN IMPLICITLY (AND OCCASIONALLY EXPLICITLY) DISAVOWED ANY DESIRE OR INTENTION TO RETURN TO EXACTLY THE PRE-1968 POLITICAL SITUATION. IN THE FUTURE, THEY SAID, PARTIES MUST REPRESENT THE MASS OF THE PEOPLE, RATHER THAN OLIGARCHIC SPECIAL INTERESTS, AND MUST CONDUCT THEIR INTERNAL AFFAIRS DEMOCRATICALLY. ELECTION ACTIVITIES BY THE PARTIES SHOULD BE FINANCED BY THE GOVERNMENT TO PRECLUDE DEPENDENCE ON THE WEALTHY. THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROMOTE AND REGULATE THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RESPONSIBLE PARTY STRUCTURE THROUGH PROMULGATION OF AN ELECTORAL CODE TO PROVIDE LEGAL RECOGNITION FOR THE PARTIES AND TO REGULATE THEIR OPERATIONS AND CONDUCT.

4. BOTH ALSO ATTACKED THE CURRENT ORGANIZATION OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES AS IMPROPERLY UNREPRESENTATIVE, AND SUGGESTED THAT REPRESENTATION SHOULD BE MADE PROPORTIONAL TO POPULATION BY LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 PANAMA 00168 01 OF 02 112142Z

CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT. THEY CALLED FOR RE-INSTITUTION OF DIRECT ELECTION OF THE PRESIDENT, AND FOR CONVEYANCE OF MEANINGFUL LEGISLATIVE POWER TO THE ASSEMBLY AND ITS REMOVAL FROM THE APPOINTED LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION.

5. ON THE FOLLOWING DAY, DIRECTOR OF THE GOVERNMENT INFORMATION COMMISSION ROMULO ESCOBAR ISSUED OFFICIAL STATEMENTS TO EACH OF THE SPANISH-LANGUAGE LOCAL NEWSPAPERS IN REACTION TO THE PROGRAM; THESE WERE ALL SUBSTANTIALLY IDENTICAL, AND APPEARED IN AFTERNOON "REPUBLICA" FOR JANUARY 5 AND IN OTHER MORNING PAPERS ON JANUARY 6 (FBIS/PANAMA PA 061616Y).

6. ON BEHALF OF THE GOP, ESCOBAR SPECIFICALLY DENIES THAT THE CURRENT PERIOD IS A DEMOCRATIC "INDIAN SUMMER". RATHER, SAID ESCOBAR, THIS WAS "AN AUTHENTIC EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM" BY WILL OF TORRIJOS (OTHER PAPERS' VERSIONS INCLUDED SPECIFIC STATEMENTS THAT THE LIBERALIZATION WOULD NOT END WITH TREATY RATIFICATION). POLITICAL PARTY CONVENTIONS BEING ORGANIZED IN THE COUNTRY, AND MEDIA COMMENT ON THEM, REFLECTED THE RIGHT AND DUTY OF

CITIZENS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINIONS
AND BE LISTENED TO ON THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL PROBLEMS.
THE GOVERNMENT, CONCLUDED ESCOBAR, "HAS WELCOMED THE
IDEA THAT THE STATE COVER THE EXPENSES OF THOSE WHO
PARTICIPATE IN THE POLITICAL DEBATE BECAUSE THIS WILL
ALLOW EVERYBODY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTIONS AND
PREVENT THE PROCESS FROM BEING CONTROLLED BY A GROUP
WHICH IS VERY BELLIGERENT BECAUSE IT IS ECONOMICALLY
POWERFUL."

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PAGE 01 PANAMA 00168 02 OF 02 112144Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 PANAMA 0168

7. COMMENT: RACTION TO THIS PROGRAM IN PARTICULAR,
AND TO THE REEMERGENCE OF THE DORMANT POLITICAL PARTIES
GENERALLY, IS STILL EMERGING--NOR IS IT ALL BY ANY
MEANS FAVORABLE. MEDIA REPORTS HAVE INCLUDED DECLARA-
TIONS FROM STUDENT GROUPS, AND FROM THE VERAGUAS PRO-
VINCIAL COORDINATING COUNCIL (WHCIH IS MADE UP OF THE
COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVES FROM THAT PROVINCE), SUPPORT-
ING THE CURRENT STRUCTURE OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AND
REJECTING PROPOSALS FOR ALTERATION. THE PRESS REPORTS
THAT A GROUP IN SANTIAGO, VERAGUAS, INCLUDING THE
GOVERNOR OF THE PROVINCE, DEMONSTRATED AGAINST THE
CONVENTION OF THE PANAMENISTA PARTY (THE PARTY OF
EXILED EX-PRESIDENT ARNULFO ARIAS) BEFORE IT WAS HELD
IN THAT CITY JANUARY 8. BUT WHILE THE LONGEVITY OF
THIS OPENING FOR GREATER ACTIVITY BY THE OLD POLS AND
THEIR PARTIES IS BY NO MEANS TOTALLY SECURE, THE OPPO-
SITION POLITICIANS AND THEIR GROUPS APPEAR TO BE CON-
TINUING TO USE THIS PERIOD OF RELAXATION TO

SOLIDIFY FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR GROUPS A CONTINUING
PLACE IN THE PUBLIC EYE. END COMMENT.
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PAGE 02 PANAMA 00168 02 OF 02 112144Z

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